

AD 682290

THE STRIKE TEAMS: TACTICAL PERFORMANCE AND STRATEGIC POTENTIAL

F. J. West, Jr.

January 1969

DDC  
REGISTERED  
FEB 13 1969  
REGISTERED  
B

This document has been processed  
for public release and sale for  
\$1.00 per copy plus shipping

P-3987

THE STRIKE TEAMS: TACTICAL PERFORMANCE AND STRATEGIC POTENTIAL

F. J. West, Jr.\*

The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California

In ancient battles the principle of mass led to organizational cohesion and tactical strength. The Roman soldier marching in the phalanx knew that his flanks and rear were protected by the shoulder-to-shoulder formation. As long as a unit remained tightly knit, it was least vulnerable and its chances of victory over less tactically cohesive enemies were highest. Modern weapons have upset this balance. The principle of mass now leads to organizational confusion and tactical vulnerability. Each man in a fire fight is safest when he seeks individual cover and concealment. Men on the march are vulnerable precisely because they feel secure. In the scattering effect of the initial battle, control over units decreases in proportion to the size and intensity of the engagement.

The honored battle principle of mass should not be applicable axiomatically to Vietnam, or to any future conflict involving American forces. In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, masses of men were needed to supply with their rifles the volume of firepower necessary to establish fire superiority, inflict substantial enemy casualties, and insure victory on the battlefield. The place of manpower in the causality of these events is now severely questionable.

If the objective is simply to attrit the enemy main forces, then in examining the course of engagements one should distinguish between what may be called "involved presence" and "proximate presence." When, for instance, a battalion mounts a search-and-destroy operation, it is

---

\*Any views expressed in this paper are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of The Rand Corporation or the official opinion or policy of any of its governmental or private research sponsors. Papers are reproduced by The Rand Corporation as a courtesy to members of its staff.

This paper was adapted from the unclassified portions of a presentation by the author at the Third Annual DOD Counterinsurgency Research and Development Symposium, held during October 1968 at Battelle Laboratories in Columbus, Ohio.

not the battalion commander's intention that all 1000 of his men engage the enemy simultaneously. Indeed, it is his fervent hope that this does not occur; for if it does, he is most probably in the midst of an enemy ambush and has lost control of his troops. A commander posts point and flank elements to avoid the simultaneous and sizable engagement of his troops. When contact is made, he wishes to let the situation develop slowly, so that he can identify enemy intentions and strengths and then commit his forces carefully and in control.

Of course, the confusion of real battle generally twists the concepts of control and measured response. But both in theory and in practice a unit of 100 men or more almost never intends to or actually does commit all its riflemen to the battle in one fell swoop. There is a distinct time lag in the development of engagements, either offensive or defensive, which allows an observer to chronologically and spatially characterize the participants in terms of either involved presence or proximate presence.

To the traditional military strategists, even the most brilliant, such as Clausewitz and Guederian, this distinction was of little note for operational planning, since the forces necessary for victory had to be massed within striking distance. In the past the means of mobility have been so slow that the only way to insure the proximate presence of troops for reasons of firepower and replacements was to travel in large units. Although the commander intended only a minority of his troops to become involved initially, he had to have a large backup force physically close at hand in order to command and commit them. The proximate presence had to be measured in terms of meters; reinforcements many miles distant were of no use at all, for they could not converge on the battlefield rapidly enough to be of use.

This principle of proximate mass still holds true for the North Vietnamese. For the Americans, time has largely replaced space as the crucial factor determining the position of those forces needed as the proximate presence. The gradual development of a fire fight, from the time of initial contact to the time when the situation is that of involved presence, is generally sufficient to allow relief, first by fire support and second by reinforcements.

The helicopter and the radio have largely eliminated the need for the time-honored proximate presence of troops arrayed in large units for long periods of time, awaiting without any productivity the development of battle. It is now possible to conduct operations with the intent that only those troops necessary for involved presence are assigned to any given area, in the initial deployment.

The proximate presence of these reinforcements need no longer be measured spatially; it can now be measured in increments of time. The helicopter allows reinforcements to close on a battlefield faster than Caesar or Hannibal could commit his rear ranks.

The means of mobility, communications, and firepower at the disposal of American forces represent major technological breakthroughs in the tools of warfare. Although these breakthroughs mainly have been adapted to the task of making traditional tactics and maneuvers more easily executed, they have also raised the possibility of some revisions in organizational structure and unit missions, as the evidence mounts that for certain tasks several small units are more effective than one large unit.

One set of such small units is the strike teams. Strike teams is a generic term used to describe a variety of friendly units in Vietnam whose common characteristics are smallness in size, missions in enemy areas, concealment in movement, surprise in attack, and suddenness in withdrawal. Strike teams include, among others, the two USMC reconnaissance battalions in I Corps, the hundreds of U. S. Army LRRPs (Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrols) in I, II and III Corps, the Australian SAS (Special Air Service) in III Corps, several Special Forces detachments working in the Central Highlands with the Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Groups, the Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units and the U. S. Navy SEAL (Sea-Air-Land Commando) platoons in III and IV Corps.

Strike teams have been growing in terms of total numbers and acquired skills since the spring of 1965. They represent a classic case of strategy slowly evolving from tried tactics. When Marine reconnaissance platoons, for instance, first were sent out into the hills of I Corps, their mission was to find and report the location of enemy

units; the infantry battalions would then do the fighting. This scenario did not work well. Recon found enemy soldiers but not units; the enemy preferred to travel dispersed during the day, which was when recon could observe their passage. The common sightings of two, three, five and seven enemy infantry did not warrant the commitment of a battalion. For the sake of the morale of his recon units, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, then Commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, allowed the recon teams to begin shooting at the enemy from ambush, using air and artillery whenever possible so as not to expose their own positions. Thus were born the strike teams in I Corps.

At the same time and under similar bureaucratic conditions, the Navy SEALs were starting to stalk the guerrillas along the waterways of III and IV Corps. Again it was a case of not knowing quite what to expect. As one SEAL put it, "When we first started going out small at night, guys from regular units told us the Viet Cong would just eat us up. I can remember sitting in muck up to my neck being eaten alive instead by mosquitoes, but afraid to move because I had been told the Viet Cong were everywhere."

Exactly what these small teams, be they Army, Navy, or Marines, were to do, or how they were to do it, could not be mapped out ahead of time by senior staffs. There was no body of experience directly applicable. With doctrine lagging, strike teams blazed their own tactical way. While their main assignments have been to find and to attrit the enemy, their specific missions, deployments and growth rates have depended more upon operational factors than predetermined objectives.

The first and most obvious factor was the enemy. The initial forays of the strike teams often caught the enemy at great disadvantage. In the summer of 1966, for instance, my assignment as a tactical analyst for the Marine Corps took me to the DMZ, where the first large operation against the North Vietnamese 324B Division was being mounted. Rather than join one of the five infantry battalions engaging the enemy, I joined a Force Reconnaissance team. The five of us were given a simple mission: get into the bush, find the enemy, and destroy him if you can. At dawn on a windy morning a helicopter dropped us five miles east of Khe Sanh and we quickly disappeared into the jungle. For two days we

moved through the thick undergrowth, staying well hidden, occasionally hearing the enemy chopping wood or shouting back and forth, once at midevening seeing lanterns bobbing down a valley floor. By the third morning we knew where their battalion bivouac area was, and called in artillery fire. To escape, the North Vietnamese had to cross a wide stream; first a few crossed, then dozens, then scores. That was where the artillery caught and annihilated them. Chased by an NVA platoon, we left the scene at top speed and before we could be overtaken or hemmed in, jet fighters were scrambled and erased the pursuit force.

Such incidents indicated to General Walt that the tactic had significant potential. The strike teams wedded individual training and initiative with advanced technology; five men with one radio had the firepower of a regiment at their disposal. The same idea was occurring to others, including Lieutenant General William A. Peers, of the U. S. Army.

But the NVA enemy was learning, too. One simple counter was dispersal, since hitting a moving point target is difficult, given the indirect fire weapons, problems of CEP (Circular Error Probability), map coordinate estimates and short response times. The potential of the strike teams, for Vietnam and other places, has not been properly evaluated in terms of technology. The requirements for a strike team weapons system are that it be swift, accurate and silent. Components of a system might include: a laser ranger to measure distances accurately from observer to target; a black box to fix the observer's position accurately; a missile fired from a plane and guided to the target by the observers; a missile terminally guided by the observer which does not divulge his position, etc. But right now every day the teams are out in the hills with their 1:50,000 maps and compasses, calling in fire as it was done in World War II, and before that.

To cover some large movements, the NVA took to sending out his own counterstrike teams, which roamed like destroyers around a convoy. These flankers could sweep aside small units; it cost the enemy, however, his previous advantage of invisible movement, for its pattern indicated his shifts. And in some other areas, the enemy was so thick and entrenched that he could give a team a race for its life, and mass firepower

against the helicopters called for extractions. Strike teams were loath to enter locales where infrared readouts indicated large enemy forces, because they learned from experience that the enemy had come to expect strike teams and planned accordingly. In the Ashau Valley and along the DMZ, for instance, by 1967 the enemy had adapted to strike teams and sent his small outguard patrols roving the sides of the hills looking for Marines. The Marines did not fear the initial contact, however, since the opposing force was generally of their own size, and they usually could settle the meeting engagements satisfactorily with their M-16s. It was the subsequent piling-on tactic that they hated. For once the fire fight began, other enemy units moved in. If the team was lucky, it broke contact and escaped from the area. If not, it had to defend until reinforced or extracted by helicopter. For the morale of the reconnaissance Marines, either the big battalions were needed to clean out such hornet's nests, or the strike teams had to stay out.

Other strike teams faced other enemies. General Peers, currently commanding I Army Field Force in II Corps, found an added bonus in using his LRRPs. Not only were they seekers and harassers of encroaching NVA units, they were pinging away at two Viet Cong local force battalions which had proved too elusive for entrapment by large U. S. units. (An enemy often overlooked by American officials, the local force Viet Cong, long familiar with the people and the terrain in set locales, is the bane of local GVN officials, such as village chiefs, Popular Force militia and hamlet elders.) In the delta, SEAL platoons sometimes were even more selective, targeting upon individual members of the Viet Cong political apparatus. In short, strike teams cut across the spectrum of enemy forces.

The second factor which affected the operations of strike teams was terrain, defined demographically. Sixty to 70 percent of Vietnam is unpopulated wilderness. In the sharp hills of I Corps, Marine recon teams frequently used hidden observation posts from which to call air and artillery fire upon unsuspecting enemy groups. Even when the enemy presence was thick and encounters were at short range, the small-arms effectiveness of strike teams matched their effective-

ness in using supporting arms, as the dozens of patrols and hasty ambushes in the scrub growth of the DMZ north of Dong Ha attested.

The kill ratio was the most ballyhooed statistic quoted in regard to reconnaissance. This ratio was partially a function of terrain but mostly a function of tactics, especially of the principles of concealment and surprise. In the denser jungles of II Corps and the flatter forests of III Corps, the Army LRRPs and Australian SAS relied more on trail ambushes using small arms and claymore mines. There were many sections where long-range visibility was not possible. Then it became a war of the Indians. There, too, the strike teams kept the balance of casualty exchange far in their favor, since surprise was on their side in the majority of encounters. In all three Corps, operations were generally conducted in areas with little or no villager population and the teams relied upon the bush to hide them from the enemy.

The delta was a different case altogether, however, since there the population density was high and the amount of vegetation concealment low. So the SEALs substituted the night for the jungle and the boat for the helicopter. By using the waterways they had substantial selection of entry points and could conduct comparatively discreet insertions. By using the darkness they could proceed to their ambush sites undetected, even when they moved near or within a hamlet. The SEALs thus adapted a style which fitted the situation, (although that method did not beget too many experiments along similar lines within the Viet Cong controlled sections of the populated areas of I, II and III Corps).

There are essential differences between the strike patrols and the ordinary small-unit patrols conducted by U. S. forces in the populated areas. In fact, the roles of the opposing forces are exactly reversed. In the populated areas, friendly forces must patrol constantly to prevent enemy infiltration and they must carry on the administrative routines of supply, communication, travel, etc. Thus their daily exposure factor is high and the chance of meeting the enemy low. The strike teams, however, are the guerrillas in the enemy area. Whether the enemy is carrying on a daily routine or simply resting,



he feels safe and secure in his own area. He then becomes the hunted by the silent teams. And there is much less that he can do to protect his areas from this sort of attack than the GVN can to protect their areas.

Mobility constituted the third operational factor for the strike teams. Mobility took two levels--first, there had to be an element of non-consistency in the insertion and area coverage frequency of strike teams to avoid patterns detectable by the enemy. There are areas in I Corps where repetition of strike teams has allowed the enemy time to learn and adapt, particularly by mining or guarding landing zones, of which there are relatively few in the jungle. The strike teams often avoid returning to hot areas for several days or weeks after forced extractions and thereby can control casualties to some degree.

But if strike teams became more common, and if the same areas had to be covered again and again, casualties in some areas would rise. This is due to tactics and location. But in other areas where enemy activity is not as great, strike teams might be expanded yet the casualties might remain very low. The SEALs are especially fortunate, since their insertion points include thousands of kilometers of waterways, and hence complicate enemy coverage.

In any event, if strike team casualties in any areas were to rise at a rate comparable or exceeding that of the large units, the options would be to avoid that area or to enter in larger force.

Since the ability of the enemy to mass clandestinely or swiftly could not often be predicted with sufficient geographical specificity, the strike teams countered with a second level of mobility. This counter was footpower, a willingness to get up and get away after making a hit or when the enemy seemed alerted and strong. Last fall, for instance, I was visiting a Vietnamese friend who had a small unit set to go into a Viet Cong hamlet after four guerrillas supposedly there on leave. I asked what would happen if the enemy had brought home comrades for the holidays. "Simple" my friend replied. "We do just what we used to do in the old days--we run away."

Whereas a large unit often endeavors to inflict as many casualties as possible regardless of the cost to itself, a strike team endeavors to inflict as many casualties as it can on the enemy at no cost to itself. Like the Viet Cong, the strike teams will try to refuse contact when they don't like the situation. The size and condition of the teams make pursuit of them fruitless and dangerous. Seven men can squirm through brush that will stop a company; in other situations, they back off into the night. For the enemy to plunge unplanned into pursuit has invited hasty ambushes, tear gas, and claymore mines with delay fuses.

The fourth operation factor was reaction forces. Passive defense by evacuation did not always work. When a strike team had to go to ground it needed help, and it was crucial that whatever was required to save a team was forthcoming. By their actions, senior commanders in all services have keenly manifested this attitude. The most spectacular example of this awareness occurred one night in June of 1966, when an 18-man Marine reconnaissance team on a hilltop was surrounded by an NVA regiment and attacked repeatedly. During that long night, reaction forces included a U. S. Army Special Forces team and their Vietnamese gunners pounding the hillside with artillery; continuous sorties by U. S. Air Force and Marine fixed-wing aircraft expending over 2500 items or ordnance; a Navy destroyer standing offshore to deliver fire support from her five-inch guns; and a Marine battalion in the attack at first light. When the siege was broken at noon, the strike team had taken six fatalities, and earned one Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses, 15 Silver Stars and 18 Purple Hearts. The leader of the strike team told the first Marine from the reaction force to reach his position, "Buddy, I never expected to see the sun rise. When it did, I knew you'd be coming."

A strike team is not independent; its members must feel that they belong to a powerful system which cares. A team member must have a high degree of confidence in himself, in the other team members, and in the system which backs him and puts him out there in the first place.

Reaction forces tie directly in with the fifth factor which affects the operations of the strike teams: the training and the attitude of the team members. Until recently the question had remained unanswered whether large bodies of troops could ever be trained and supported to fight a war using the strike team concept, combining superior individual jungle skill with sophisticated equipment. The techniques, the mission, and the training threatened to remain relegated to the very few, stamped nontransferable. A mystique about reconnaissance Marines, for instance, developed on the Allied side. So arduous were some of their patrols and so skilled some of their stalks that they were treated with the legendary respect of folk heroes. Sergeants who led strike teams thought a full infantry platoon of 44 men was as big as an army and had no business in the brush. Infantry-platoon sergeants, on the other hand, thought the reconnaissance NCOs were slightly crazy and distinctly conceited. Thus, awe, pride, and resentment inhibited emulation. The belief was widespread that strike team training and tactics could not be successfully applied to regular infantry battalions.

While commanding the U. S. Army Fourth Infantry Division in II Corps in 1967, however, General Peers proved differently. He adopted the small teams on a division-wide scale, and his division included a substantial percentage of two-year draftees. It was important that they believe they could do the job, and that they were not really all alone. The division went on to establish an extraordinary record.

And by 1967 the Marines who came to reconnaissance were not hand-picked; they were simply assigned as they would have been to any other infantry unit--one indication, at least, that this might be the way to fight in the future. Reconnaissance molded men; it was that simple. Those assigned were shown a slightly different way of fighting. They were schooled hard and sent forth with experienced leaders.

Not all men adapted, but over 90 percent of them did. There was no difference between the young recruit placed into an infantry battalion and the one sent to a reconnaissance battalion. They were sorted out according to the numbers needed. Reconnaissance Marines had no difficulty with the recruits. They kept them, when they could, for

the first few weeks in garrison at Dong Ha or Da Nang, to train them, particularly in reading maps and calling in fire. Even then they didn't have the time to do this in all cases. So many young privates learned the way soldiers do in every war--by keeping their mouths shut and following the experienced team members.

The reconnaissance units preferred to promote and develop their own team leaders. They liked to have at least 20-year-old corporals in charge of teams, but reconnaissance didn't lack for NCOs--those with rank who joined the units were sent out as assistant team leaders for three or four patrols to get their feet on the ground, then were given a team of their own. Again, over 90 percent of the NCOs brought in by random selection had no difficulty adapting.

To all new men the same line was preached: "You'll stay alive longer in recon, even if the work is hairier than in the infantry units." It was a good selling point. While many men were scared in the bush, they knew they were safer there.

This factor of lower friendly casualties is a most important reason for evaluating the strike team performance and potential. The strike team work is more nerve-wracking but less deadly than the infantry work. The reconnaissance troops know this; and it makes a significant morale difference, especially since a reconnaissance troop knows his survival largely depends on himself. He often has a distinct say in what his team does or does not do. He rarely feels caught in the impersonal grinds of the gods.

These operational factors set the parameters within which the strike teams could work, and delimited the objectives which the teams could accomplish. It became obvious that the strike teams had severe limitations. In fact, the concept was inapplicable to the fundamental missions of conventional warfare: strike teams could not hold terrain and they could not destroy the enemy forces. They traded terrain for survival, being most vulnerable when the enemy knew where they were, being safest when the enemy assumed the land belonged to him. While they occasionally disrupted an enemy unit to a major degree, as in the DMZ incident related above, most usually they could just sting and run.

Efforts were made to include Vietnamese forces in the concept, with ambiguous results. Such teams seemed to work better with Americans. The success of any team depended on the interrelated workings of the operational variables, and in at least five fields strongpoints accruing from American encadrement were fully recognized and sought by the teams. These fields were: technology, mobility (writ large), initiative, command-and-control (at the higher levels), and attitude. Whereas some of these variables are functions inherent to the development of a highly modernized army, the matter of attitude relates to doctrine, and the doctrine relates to past advice given and received. Thus, Americans who believe the strike team concept has a nonnegligible place in strategy are trying to dissuade Vietnamese of lessons learned at least partially from Americans in the years gone past.

These distinct limitations of the strike teams are implicit to their Fabian style. Cast in the mode of guerrillas in the enemy areas, however, the strike teams have displayed three relative advantages over larger units. First, as one might suspect, their rate of contact is significantly higher. Engagements and attrition of the enemy, when measured on a per man basis, have shown that the strike teams of all three services are more productive by these criteria than the larger conventional units.

Second, contrary to popular belief, decentralization can decrease vulnerability. For three years, regular U. S. infantry battalions have suffered significantly higher casualties in proportion to those suffered by the strike teams of any of the three services. In fact, strike teams are often reluctant to move in groups of over a dozen men, believing that larger size means noise, exposure, discovery, fire, casualties, and frustrated evacuations. When a battalion (or larger) operation is mounted, most often the telltale signs are there for the enemy to read: pre-invasion air and artillery strikes on the objective, large convoys of men and supplies, unusual air activity, etc. Rarely can a large unit be moved secretly. Once on the ground near the objective, concealment is still the role of the enemy and exposure that of the

allied forces. Tactically, this deprives the battalion of the element of surprise and leaves the opening round up to the enemy.

A large unit (100 men or more) on the move can forsake concealment for cover which, hopefully, is provided in deterrent form by the suppressive capability of its firepower. The strike teams make it their business to disappear as fast as possible once they are in Viet Cong areas. They must cling to concealment, be it the jungle or the night; survival motivates them.

The size of the strike team represents nothing more than the economic principle of optimum productivity. Given as their mission the attrition of the enemy, and allowed to use (in strict moderation) the tools of technology, additional patrol members beyond the five to ten needed for watch-standing, defense, and first-burst ambushes have below average productivity. In fact, units beyond a certain size have a negative productivity in terms of mobility, stealth, concealment, and cohesiveness.

Third, the terrain coverage of strike teams, in keeping with their reconnaissance aspect, is considerable. Deployed and debriefed properly, the information collected by the strike teams can be collated and, together with other intelligence inputs, used to establish patterns of enemy activity and movement.

Over the past three years, the actual performance of the strike teams have indicated the operation factors and their limitations. In my opinion, this history also points out two complementary missions to which the strike teams could be set so as to maximize their relative advantage, if a substantial number of strike teams were to be organized and incorporated into a strategic framework for Vietnam. These missions are harassment and surveillance.

The means to harassment is attrition. Although some important enemy cadres may occasionally be eliminated, attrition by strike teams does not imply the gradual destruction of the enemy. (Destruction is the rate of attrition minus the rate of regeneration.) Attrition would be undertaken not for the sake of kill ratios or other statistics, but for its psychological effects upon the enemy. The intent would be to lower the morale of the enemy by keeping irregular pressure upon the

enemy in his own backyard. Especially during the past year prisoner interrogations have been revealing that many enemy units are aware they have been stalked by small teams with sudden ambushes and massive fire support and that this awareness has unsettled them.

Harassment would also have the purpose of restricting the enemy's movement. There would be areas where enemy passage would no longer be cost-free. The precedent is the Viet Cong's brilliant use of mines in certain GVN areas. I have patrolled in parts of the coastal plains of Central Vietnam with American units when they have been confronted by the shadow enemy and as we started losing men week after week without any pattern, without any warning, without any solid contact, morale went down and down. There is a distinct qualitative difference in how casualties are sustained which affects how a unit fights and feels. It became difficult to persuade the troops that there was a reason sufficient to justify the steady patrolling of certain areas. Once mine-shy, units would avoid the bad places, or enter them only with great reluctance. Harassment of the enemy could affect similar channelization.

The morale of a unit is worse affected by constant small attrition than a few major engagements. Those who survive major engagements once or perhaps twice a year have the intervening several months to reorganize, recruit, retrain and rest. This is not so when the pressure is constant and the casualties consistent, for then each man wonders each day if it is his turn. Confidence in the leaders wanes and critical questions about the wisdom of their tactics and strategy arise.

Enemy countertactics to the strike teams should be considered a gain if they raise his exposure factor or if they tie up resources otherwise of offensive uses to him.

This recognized but unpredictable sort of harassment also affects the attitudes of the villagers and the morale of the GVN officials. Although the contact rate and attrition figures may be low, if the strike teams generate operations consistently, the word spreads through the rural communities: the GVN or the Americans are moving in small units against the Viet Cong. The SEALs, for instance, have been known to sneak into a hamlet in the dead of night, burst into a house and shake their man awake. This arrest technique has had a psychological impact

throughout the Delta far exceeding its actual accomplishments. The word has gone out from province to province: There are Americans with green and black faces who come from the water in the middle of the night to seize the VC. It sounds like a line out of a Grade C horror movie but it is very much real and unsettling to a VC to think he cannot come home at night to visit his wife. The reputation of the SEALs has far exceeded their physical capabilities. (There just are not that many of them and the Delta holds over five million people.) The odds are very low that they would actually break down many doors in any given year. Yet the fact that they have done it successfully has set Viet Cong on edge in many provinces.

The utility of strike teams is thus partially measurable by the extent to which gossip and repetition foster their reputation for invisible ubiquity. The intent would be to deter from active support to the enemy those fence-sitters who now cooperate because the penalty for refusal is higher than for compliance. If rice movement at night, for instance, were to run the known risk of ambush, many nondedicated activists in Viet Cong areas would try to desist.

The second major mission of strike teams is surveillance. There are screens of strike teams around several of the major cities, deployed with the object of picking up any signs of the enemy massing within attack distance of the urban centers. In large measure, strike teams can remove the burden of searching from the large units conducting search-and-destroy operations. When lucrative enemy targets are found, battalion exploitation forces could be thrown in on spoiling operations. This use of strike teams could relieve many battalions that are tied up in missions not related to the populated areas and yet are not actively engaged. To this end strike teams are an economy of force measure which permits a higher proportion of American forces to be reallocated in keeping with more important tasks, such as developing a rural area security system which the GVN can gradually take over.

It was at first by trial and error that the strike teams learned. Later, however, institutionalized memories within units emerged, as the



men, naturally close, swapped sea stories, extracted lessons, wrote them down, and passed them along verbally and by example to newcomers. Desire for knowledge also led to interservice training. The Australian SAS have accompanied SEALs to learn their techniques, and Marine recon have accompanied the SAS, and the Army LRRPs have accompanied the Marine recon.

These innovations, improvements and accrued knowledge have so far proceeded in the absence of strategic doctrine (and in cases like the SEALs, perhaps because of it). When tactics prove themselves, however, it is time to extract the concepts and construct the doctrine to test for future applicability and influence on force structures.

To a future ground warfare conflict between modernized nations, the strike teams could bring by their small size the initial advantage of frontline target dispersal and by their radios the impact of massed firepower on troops in conventional formations. When the Viet Cong slam rockets into the American division headquarters, that is in keeping with the strike team concept. Gross disparities in target exposure would be of no mean significance were forces of equal technological might to clash.

And relating to future conflicts of a lower scale on the spectrum of warfare, institutionalization of strike teams would bring to the policymaker added selectivity in military instruments. The British actions in Sarawak and northern Malaysia over the past four years exemplify the utilization of unobtrusive small units. Strike teams apply force in a restrained manner. Discrimination in the selection of point targets is not an effect attributable to any comparatively enlightened morality on the part of the strike teams; it comes as a function of specificity. Infrared might read out a village whereas five men staking out a trail select a man. And, of course, the structuring of forces to include flexibility in the use of strike teams relates to the development of a military option, not to a priori argument for its future use.

The present use of strike teams, however, is another matter. Many commanders still believe the role of small units in enemy areas is pure reconnaissance. For instance, in December of 1967, a large operation was mounted south of Da Nang. With two battalions pushing them,

a North Vietnamese regiment had run right by a strike team. The team counted 700 of the enemy, but the team could not call in fire because their mission was "to observe"; the battalions were to do the fighting. Opportunities can be foregone because of such unquestioned doctrine.

The history and military tradition of Western nations have emphasized the dominant role of large units and mighty battles in determining the outcome of wars. Despite whatever lip service might have been paid to the tactical tenets of guerrilla warfare, the temptation remained to do most what one knew best, had studied longest, and was best equipped for, mentally and materially: large-unit war. Many battalion commanders put an arbitrary time frame on the war: the number of months they had command. The central issue often became combat for the sake of combat, recognition and reward. In a way, the ARVN and VC commanders were more rational on refusing combat unless trapped or clearly holding an advantage. Now it is very true that the battalions have to perform a variety of missions and cannot always afford to be as discriminating as reconnaissance. But that does not lessen the validity of comparisons where the missions are the same, or the validity to question the concepts which underlie the missions.

Small unit actions were looked on as an adjunct or an aid to a large-unit strategy, not an alternative. But the tactics of the engagements, the technological potential for manpower substitution, and the political nature of the conflict indicated the wisdom of wider adoption of the strike team method.

In Vietnam the crucial question now is not whether to use strike teams, but rather how many to use and for what ends. Set to the objectives of harassment and surveillance as outlined above, the strike teams have proven two strong relative advantages over larger, more conventional units: they can perform those tasks using fewer men and with a lower casualty rate. Any such suboptimized set of strike team objectives could have meaning only if it were placed within an overall Vietnam strategy in keeping with friendly performances, enemy capabilities and political realities. Since this strategy does not seem to exist, lacking therefore also are rational criteria by which the strike

teams could be judged and accorded strategic status and force deployment in keeping with their tactical worth.

Since I do not accept the strategy of attrition as a valid and attainable war objective, it must be made very clear that I believe the merit of strike teams does not lie simply in their ability to attrit more economically. I see strike teams as just one part of an overall strategy, part of a time-buying process while the South Vietnamese forces are being reshaped and a strong area security system within the populated area is infused.

In a war where there is a definite need to hold territory or to seize area objectives, a considerable number of troops are needed: But where the objective is to punish and prevent access to an enemy, the number of troops employed in the task could in large measure depend upon the tactics chosen. The strike team concept, with its offensive power, its psychological impact, and defensive elusiveness, has called into question, for certain objectives, traditional tactics and the classic ratios of friendly to enemy forces.